

MIKE GAYLE

ALL THE
LONELY
PEOPLE


HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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The Hope Family Calendar
The Man I Think I Know
Half a World Away

Non-fiction

The To-Do List

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1

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To Mum and Dad
for everything.

The loneliest moment in someone's life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.

– F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I

Now

Moments before Hubert met Ashleigh for the first time, he had been settled in his favourite armchair, Puss curled up on his lap, waiting for Rose to call. When the doorbell rang he gave a tut of annoyance, waging it was one of those damn courier people who were always trying to make him take in parcels for his neighbours.

‘Would you mind accepting this for number sixty-three?’ they would ask.

‘Yes, me mind a great deal!’ he would snap. ‘Now clear off!’ and then he would slam the door shut in their faces.

As he shifted Puss from his lap and stood up to answer the door, Hubert muttered angrily to himself.

‘Parcels, parcels, parcels! All day, every day, for people who are never in to receive the damn things! If people want them things so much why them no just buy it from the shops like everybody else?’

With words of scathing condemnation loaded and ready to fire, Hubert unlocked the front door and flung it open only to discover that the person before him wasn’t anything like he’d been expecting.

Instead of a uniformed parcel courier, there stood a young woman with short dyed blond hair. In a nod towards the recent spell of unseasonably warm April weather she was wearing a pink vest top, cut-off jeans and pink flip-flops. Holding her hand was a small child, a girl, with blond hair, also wearing a pink top, shorts and pink flip-flops.

The young woman smiled.

‘Hi, there. I’m not disturbing you, am I?’

Hubert said nothing but made a mental note that should he need to contact the police he could tell them that the woman spoke with a funny accent. To his untrained ear it sounded Welsh or possibly Irish, though he couldn't be entirely sure it was either.

She held up her hand as if in surrender.

'It's okay. I'm not trying to sell you anything or nothing. I just came round to say hello really. We've just moved in next door.'

She pointed in the direction of the block of low-rise flats adjacent to Hubert's property.

'We're new to the area and don't know a single soul. Anyway, this morning I was saying to myself, "Ash, you're never going to get to know anyone around here unless, you know, you start talking to people." So I called round to see the couple in the flat below but I think they must be out at work. Then I tried the family across the hallway but they didn't open the door, even though I could hear the TV blaring away. So then I tried all the other flats and got nothing – all out or busy, I suppose – so I got Layla ready and took her to try the mother and toddler group at the library but it's just closed due to funding problems apparently so . . .'

She paused, looking at him expectantly, perhaps hoping for a smile or a nod of comprehension, but Hubert remained impassive.

The young woman cleared her throat self-consciously but then continued.

'My name's Ash, well it's Ashleigh really but everyone calls me Ash. And this little madam here . . .' She glanced down at the small child. '. . . is my daughter, Layla.'

The little girl covered her eyes with both hands but peeked up at Hubert through the cracks between her fingers.

'Layla,' said Ash, her voice warm with encouragement, 'say hello to our lovely new neighbour Mr . . .'

Ashleigh looked at him expectantly but Hubert continued to say nothing.

'I think she's a bit shy,' said Ash, returning her attention to Layla. 'You won't believe it to look at me but I used to be dead shy too when I was a kid. Wouldn't say boo to a goose, me. My

mam was always saying, “Ashleigh Jones, you won’t get far in life being shy now, will you?” and my nan would be like, “Oh, leave the poor child alone, Jen, you’ll give her a complex.” Then Mam would say, “I just don’t want her to get set in her ways, like,” and then Nan would say, “She’s only a babby, she’s too young to get set in her ways.” Then Mam would roll her eyes like this . . .’

Ashleigh paused to illustrate. She did it so well that for a moment Hubert thought her pupils might have disappeared for good.

‘. . . and say, “Like she isn’t set her ways . . . she already hates vegetables,” and then Nan would shrug and say nothing. The thing is, though, Mam was right, I hated vegetables then and I can’t stand them now. Hate the things.’

She smiled hopefully at Hubert.

‘I’m going on, aren’t I? I do that. I think it’s nerves. In new situations I just start talking and I can’t stop. Anyway, I suppose what I’m trying to say is that it’s nice to be neighbourly, isn’t it? And this . . . well, this is me being exactly that.’

She thrust out a hand for him to shake and Hubert noted that her nails were painted in bright glittery purple nail polish that was chipped at the edges. Then from inside the house Hubert heard his phone ringing.

‘Me got to go,’ he said urgently, and without waiting for her response, he shut the door and hurried back to his front sitting room to answer the call.

‘Rose?’

‘Yes, it’s me, Dad. Are you okay? You sound a bit out of breath.’

Breathing a sigh of relief, he settled back down in his chair.

‘Me fine. Just someone at the door, that’s all. But you know me, me dealt with them quickly. No one comes between me and my daughter! So tell me, Professor Bird, what have you been up to this week and don’t leave anything out, me want to hear it all!’

It had been almost twenty years since Hubert’s daughter Rose had relocated to Australia and rarely a day went by when he didn’t wish that she lived closer. He’d never say this to her, of

course; the last thing he wanted was to prevent her from living her dreams. But there were moments, usually when he least expected, when he felt her absence so intensely he could barely draw breath.

Still, she was a good girl, calling every week without fail, and while it wasn't the same as having her with him, it was the next best thing. Anyway, international calls had moved on from when Hubert used to ring his mother back home in Jamaica. Gone were the days of hissing static, crossed lines and eye-watering phone bills. With today's modern technology, the cost was minimal and the lines so crystal clear it was almost like being in the same room.

Without need for further prompting, Rose told him about the faculty meetings she'd chaired, the conferences in faraway places she'd agreed to speak at and the fancy meals out she'd enjoyed with friends. Hubert always loved hearing about the exciting and glamorous things she'd been up to. It made him profoundly happy to know that she was living such a full and contented life.

After a short while, Rose drew her news to a close.

'Right then, that's more than enough about me. How about you, Pops? What have you been up to?'

Hubert chuckled.

'Now tell me, girl, why does a fancy, la-di-dah academic like you want to know what a boring old man like me has been doing with his days? You a glutton for punishment?'

Rose heaved a heavy but good-natured sigh.

'Honestly, Dad, you're like a broken record! Every single time I call you say: "Why you want to know what me up to?" and I say, "Because I'm interested in your life, Dad," and you say something like, "Well, on Tuesday me climbed Mount Everest, and on Wednesday me tap-danced with that nice lady from *Strictly* and then I say, "Really, Dad?" and then finally you laugh that big laugh of yours and tell me the truth. It's so frustrating! For once, can you please just tell me what you've been up to without making a whole song and dance about it?'

Hubert chuckled again. His daughter's impression of him had

been not perfect, managing to replicate both the richness of his voice and the intricacies of the diction of a Jamaican man who has called England his home for the best part of sixty years.

‘Me not sure me like your tone, young lady,’ he scolded playfully.

‘Good,’ retorted Rose. ‘You’re not meant to. And if you don’t want to hear more of it, you’ll stop teasing me and tell me what you’ve really been up to this week!’

‘Me was only having a little fun, Rose, you know that,’ relented Hubert. ‘But me consider myself told off, okay? So, what have I been up to?’

He slipped on his reading glasses and reached for the open notepad on the table next to him.

‘Well, on Tuesday me take a trip out to the garden centre, the big one on Oakley Road, you know it? Me buy a few bedding plants for the front garden – make the most of this mild spring we’re having – and then me stayed on there for lunch.’

‘Sounds lovely. Did Dotty, Dennis and Harvey go too?’

‘Of course! We had a whale of a time. Dotty was teasing Dennis about his gardening skills, Dennis was play fighting with Harvey in the bedding plants section, and all the while me trying to keep that rowdy bunch in line!’

Rose laughed.

‘Sounds like a good time. I wish I’d been there. How’s Dotty’s sciatica by the way? Still playing her up?’

Hubert referred to his notepad again.

‘Oh, you know how these things are when you’re old. They come and they go.’

‘Poor Dotty. Give her my love, won’t you? And how about Dennis’s great-grandson? How did he get on with his trials for . . . who was it again . . .?’

Once again Hubert referred to his notepad, only this time he couldn’t see the entry he was looking for.

‘Me think . . . me think it was Watford,’ he said panicking.

‘Are you sure? I would’ve remembered if you’d said Watford because that’s where Robin’s mother’s family are from. No, last

time we spoke you definitely said . . . West Ham . . . that's it! You said it was West Ham.'

Hubert frantically flicked through his notebook and sure enough there were the words 'WEST HAM' underlined next to 'Dennis's great-grandson'.

'Actually you might be right about that,' he said eventually. 'But really Watford or West Ham, what does it matter? Him not my great-grandson!'

Rose chuckled heartily, clearly amused by her father's charming indifference to details.

'No, Pops, I suppose he isn't. But how did he get on anyway?'

'Do you know what?' said Hubert abruptly. 'Me didn't ask Dennis and him didn't bring it up.'

'Oh, Dad,' chided Rose, 'what are you like? You really should take an interest in your friends, you know. They're good for your health. I came across a very interesting study the other day that said people with a small group of good friends are more likely to live longer.'

'Well, with friends like Dotty, Dennis and Harvey, even if me don't live for eternity it will certainly feel like it!' Hubert laughed and then cleared his throat. 'Now, darling, that's more than enough about me. Tell me more about this conference you're going to in Mexico. You're giving a big speech, you say?'

They talked for a good while longer, covering not just her trip to Mexico but also the new book proposal she was working on and the plans she had to finally landscape the garden so that she could make the most of her pool. Hubert relished every last detail she shared with him and could have listened to her talk all day. And so, as always, it was with a heavy heart that he realised their time was coming to an end.

'Right then, Pops, I'd better be going. I've got to be up early in the morning as I'm picking up a visiting professor flying in from Canada. What are your plans for the rest of the week?'

'Oh, you know. This and that.'

'Now come on, Pops, remember what we agreed? No messing about. Just tell me what you're up to.'

Hubert flicked to the most recent page of his notebook.

‘Well, tomorrow night Dotty wants to try bingo down at the new place that’s just opened up in town. Saturday, Dennis and me have talked about going to a country pub for lunch. Sunday, Harvey is having everyone round for a big roast. And Monday me having the day to meself to work on the garden. As for the rest of the week, me have no idea, but me sure Dotty’s cooking up some plans.’

‘That certainly sounds like a packed schedule!’ said Rose. ‘I don’t know how you do it.’

‘Neither do I, darling. Neither do I. Anyway, you take care, me speak to you soon.’

Ending the call, Hubert sat for a moment contemplating his conversation with Rose. He’d nearly put his foot in it once or twice. He really was going to either have a brain transplant or at the very least get himself a better system for making notes. Picking up the pen from the table beside him, he wrote down, ‘MAKE BETTER NOTES’ in his pad, then tossed it to one side with such force that Puss, who had curled up in his lap again, woke up and stared at him accusingly.

‘Don’t start with me,’ said Hubert, trying to avoid her gaze.

Puss continued to stare.

‘You know it’s not like me enjoy doing this.’

Still Puss stared.

‘It’s not like me got a choice in the matter, is it?’

Puss gave Hubert one last disdainful glower before jumping down to the floor and stalking out of the room as if to say she didn’t tolerate liars. Because the truth was Hubert Bird was a liar. And a practised one at that. Not a single word he’d said to his daughter was true. It was lies, all lies. And he felt absolutely wretched about it.